

"DemocracyFest" Austin, Texas - I'm a strong supporter of voter registration, voting, voting rights legislation and of adding a Voting Rights *Amendment* to the Constitution.

I have either introduced, supported as a co-sponsor, or I'm an advocate for the following legislative voting proposals:

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Voting Rights Amendment

I introduced H.J. RES. 28, a Voting Rights Amendment, which now has 58 co-sponsors - and growing. This is a proposal to add an amendment to the Constitution regarding the individual right to vote. This is my real priority! I hope you'll sign the petition that was passed out and I hope you'll call your U.S. Representative to see if they are a co-sponsor and, if not, urge them to become one. And if you sign the petition we'll send or e-mail you a Voting Rights Amendment Kit that has an action plan in it. If on Monday you will call 202.225.0773 - that's 202.225.0773 - we'll get the kit and the information to you. Former Governor and current DNC Chair, Howard Dean, personally endorsed it at a Voting Rights Amendment Forum last Sunday.

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Direct Election Of President And Vice President

I've introduced H.J. RES. 36 proposing an amendment to the Constitution ending the Electoral College and providing for the direct election of the President and Vice President by a *majority* of the popular vote of the people.

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Instant Runoff Voting System

I support federal funds for legislation that would require states to use an ***Instant Runoff Voting System*** . It's sometimes called

Preference

or

Choice

voting. Instead of forcing you to choose between just two candidates - sometimes the lesser of two evils - you would have a variety of choices - your first, second, and third choices. Then, through an automatic system of elimination, the person who finally ends up with a *majority*

of the votes is elected. For example, in the 2000 general election, if your first choice had been Ralph Nader and your second choice was Al Gore, you could have voted for Ralph Nader *without hurting Al Gore*

. It would have worked for the other side too. If your first choice was Pat Buchanan and your second choice George Bush, you could have voted for Pat Buchanan without hurting George Bush.

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Open Debates Amendment

Shortly, I will re-introduce my Open Debates Legislation. It would express the sense of Congress that any Presidential candidate should be permitted to participate in debates among presidential candidates if at least 5 percent of respondents in national public opinion polls of all eligible voters support the candidate's election for President *or if a majority* of respondents in such polls support the candidate's participation in such debates.

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National Legislation

I'm a co-sponsor of several other voting bills as well - e.g., the current **Dodd-Conyers bill** that Chris Dodd has in the Senate and John Conyers has in the House - the best national legislation now available.

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Proportional Voting

I'm also a co-sponsor of **proportional voting**, introduced by Rep. Cynthia McKinney.

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An *Omnibus* Voting And Elections Bill

I'm working with House Legislative Counsel to draft what will probably be the most comprehensive piece of voter legislation ever introduced.

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Strengthen And Extend The 1965 Voting Rights Act

It's also extremely important - it's the priority of the CBC and of the civil rights community - that we extend and strengthen the 1965 Voting Rights Act when it comes up for renewal before 2007.

When the CBC met with President Bush about 3 months ago, I asked him to support it. President Bush is a two-time Governor of Texas - with the entire state subject to the 1965 Voting Rights Act - but he said he didn't know anything about it, and he wouldn't deal with it until it came to his desk. So we can't expect any presidential leadership on this issue.

My priority - beyond extending the 1965 Voting Rights Act - is to continue to build support for a Voting Rights Amendment (H.J. Res. 28).

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The *Politics* Of Fighting For Constitutional Amendments

Now let me put my call for supporting H.J. Res. 28 - adding a Voting Rights Amendment to the Constitution - in a broader political context. Let's step back and see how the Voting Rights Amendment (and other economic amendments) fit into the current political climate. Does a campaign for a Voting Rights Amendment - since voting rights protect all other rights - make sense in today's political environment? Let's compare how Republicans and Democrats organize and campaign!

First, Republicans have a **theme** - less government (i.e., "states' rights" and against the "Big Federal Government"), lower taxes, and a strong defense - and

whoever

the candidate is, he or she runs on that theme.

Second, Republicans are on the **offensive** - they run *for* things, even if they're negative and discriminatory (e.g., anti-gay rights amendment in 2004).

Third, Republicans have a **strategy**: - they fight for constitutional amendments; they put us on the record by making us vote on them in Congress between elections - which keeps their conservative base energized and politically educates them between elections; and then they use them in the next campaign as a wedge issue to defeat us at the polls.

Fourth, their **programs** flow from their fight for *constitutional rights* (e.g., their so-called partial birth abortion bill; the denial of federal funds for legal abortions to poor women and women in the military, their national focus on Terri Schiavo, etc. all come from their campaign for a *right to life constitutional amendment* !)

Fifth, it's highly unlikely that any of these Republican amendments will ever become part of the Constitution. They merely use them to keep their politically conservative base active **during and between elections** in their "culture war" around "values."

And the right-wing introduces a bunch of constitutional amendments:

A right to life amendment

A term limits amendment

A balanced budget amendment

A tax limitation amendment

A don't desecrate the flag amendment

A prayer in school amendment

A Ten Commandments in public places amendment

A God in the Pledge of Allegiance amendment

A marriage or anti-gay rights amendment

An establish English as the official language of the United States amendment

And Republicans campaign every election on the *belief* - and many Americans believe, rightly or wrongly - that the 2nd Amendment gives them the individual right to a gun

Let's look at the Democratic approach.

First, Democrats have ***elections*** too - but we behave very differently from the Republicans. Every four years,
theme ***each presidential candidate provides the***
and it varies from election to

election

Second, Democrats find themselves mostly on the ***defensive***. We are constantly in the posture of protecting our past gains. For example, saving Social Security and reauthorizing the 1965 Voting Rights Act - and we certainly must do that.

But we must also have an

offensive

strategy

!

Third, Democrats have ***no consistent theme and no consistent strategy***. Democrats look to their candidates for a new theme every two or four years, and we plan for one election at time with no long-term strategy or consistency.

Fourth, what ***rights*** do Democrats fight for? ***None!*** We fight for ***programs*** - and Republicans co-opt them, often just before an election. Look what they did with prescription drugs, homeland security and education, the "Leave No Child Behind" - they stole it and changed its meaning from Marion Wright Edelman's slogan and dream.

Democrats have been made so defensive over these absurd constitutional rights and these un-American amendments proposed by Republicans that we've developed a negative rationale and posture about the Constitution - that it's good just the way it is and we shouldn't change it.

Democrats don't seem to be able to distinguish between *good amendments* and *bad amendments* ;

between basic economic
needs

that

should

be addressed with constitutional amendments and
conservative ideological wishes

that

shouldn't

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Conservative Republicans argue that the Constitution is a **static** document. Yet they propose adding all these amendments to it. That means they really see the Constitution as a **living** document, even as they say they want judges who are "strict constructionists," who will only "interpret" the Constitution as a "non-living document," and not "activist judges" who will "legislate" from the bench.

Liberal Democrats **say** the Constitution is a living document, but they **act** like it's static!

The questions to those who believe the Constitution is static and shouldn't be changed is:

If it's static, when did it become static?

If it's no longer a living document, when did it die?

Before or after the first 10 Amendments - the Bill of Rights?

Before or after the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments - the Reconstruction Amendments?

Before or after the 27th Amendment - the last amendment added?

My suggestion to Democrats - and I put it all in a book - is that we need a **theme** (I suggested building "A More Perfect Union") and a

strategy

that will include, but broaden, our political appeal and base beyond our current "special interest" groups (labor, women, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, environmentalists, etc.), to include

all

Americans.

And human rights and constitutional amendments, by definition, include ***all*** Americans!

Democrats should fight for ***human rights*** that the American people already believe they have or already believe they ***should*** have; and fight to make them ***American*** ***rights*** by putting them in the Constitution.

Therefore, I've offered nine constitutional amendments, as a ***long-term*** framework for what Democrats should be fighting for - ***one at a time*** - a sort of ***Second Bill of Rights*** :

The individual ***right*** to vote - H.J. Res. 28

The individual ***right*** to a public education of equal high quality

The individual ***right*** to health care of equal high quality

ERA - individual equal ***rights*** for women

The individual ***right*** to decent, safe, sanitary and affordable housing

The individual **right** to a clean, safe and sustainable environment

The individual **right** to fair and progressive taxes

The individual **right** to full employment

The individual **right** to elect our President and Vice President directly

All of my amendments take on states' rights directly - which gives some Democrats problems because, historically, Democrats are the ideological founders and the political party of states' rights, local control and voluntary solutions.

That's what slavery was all about - states' rights, local control and voluntary solutions over time.

The Emancipation Proclamation didn't free the slaves. It took the 13th Amendment to overcome the limitations of the 10th Amendment.

Over a period of time, the American people can be educated and brought to support these nine amendments.

And all of my amendments give Congress the **power** to implement each particular right with appropriate legislation.

A theme of building "A More Perfect Union" - combined with a human rights agenda and a peoples' constitutional rights movement - will keep Democrats on track and busy for a very very long time, election after election after election.

I don't want to end with "God Bless America." God has already richly blessed America. The real question is: ***Will America bless God?*** And supporting human rights and these constitutional amendments - in a political sense - is about as close to America blessing God as "we the people" can get here on earth.